NEWSWEEK
ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 78
5 APRIL 1982

CENTRAL AMERICA

The Diplomats Do a Turn

The Mexicans call it Ronald Reagan's *doble juego*—double play. On the one hand, the Administration is making feints toward negotiations as a way out of its El Salvador tangle. At the same time, it offers little hope that negotiations can work. Last week brought an assortment of peace feelers from Mexico's Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda; from Daniel Ortega, the head of Nicaragua's Sandinistas; from the Salvadoran guerrillas, and even from Fidel Castro himself. The Administration listened closely to all of them—and then backed away. "No one here expects that negotiations will produce anything," said one dispirited U.S. official. "We are talking about negotiations because we have no choice."

It was hard to tell whether any of the principals was really interested in compromise—or whether all were just jockeying for political advantage. At the United Nations Ortega said the Sandinistas were ready for open-ended talks, and that he was authorized to say that Castro and the Salvadoran rebels were ready to negotiate, too. But he also leveled a brutal attack on U.S. "aggression," demanded that Washington keep its hands off Nicaragua and thumbed his nose at the Administration's two major conditions—that the Sandinistas stop aiding Salvadoran rebels and halt their massive military buildup. The efforts of Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campíns were more important. The Venezuelan leader, a friend of Salvador's President José Napoleón Duarte, shifted a bit from supporting the Administration to suggest that peace talks with the rebels might not be entirely a bad idea after all. Mexico also continued its matchmaking, announcing at the U.N. that the United States and Nicaragua would begin negotiations as early as this week. Washington just as quickly called the announcement "premature," but the Administration hinted it might not hold out forever. "If we offer to negotiate and the negotiations fail, nobody will be able to blame us for not trying," said one U.S. official. "We want to be sure it's the other guy's fault."

There were at least a few obvious reasons to consider talking. If Duarte loses the election this week, ultrarightists led by Roberto (Major Bob) D'Aubuisson might well abandon Duarte's land and banking reforms. That could wither Congressional support for further military aid and leave the Administration with the need to find a face-saving way out. No matter how the election comes out, the threat of negotiations might encourage the Salvadoran Army to curb some of its human-rights abuses. The Administration also does not want to offend oil-rich Mexico, a much more important player in Central America. And the Reagan team wants to convince Congress and the allies that it has something more than gunboat diplomacy in its policy kit. A Washington Post-ABC News poll last week showed that 72 percent of Americans want no more military aid sent to El Salvador. And more than 20,000 people marched in Washington to protest the Administration's stand in Central America.

Assurance: Even so, there is no clear prospect that negotiations will work. Secretary of State Alexander Haig and his advisers believe that the Salvadoran insurgents will not be willing to give up their gains on the battlefield for a political compromise, especially with domestic and U.S. support for Duarte crumbling. It is not clear what there is to negotiate unless both left and right are willing to agree to a new set of elections and that is hardly likely. The right wing of the Republican Party is outraged at the thought that the Reagan Administration might invite Moscow or Castro and the rebels to collaborate in shaping the future of Central America. In San Salvador, U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton assured businessmen last week: "No one, neither in your government or my government, will give the extreme left that which they have been unable to win with bullets. Nobody. Never."

Another danger is that if the leftists gain a share in power through negotiations, they might try to take over completely—as the more radical elements of the Sandinistas did after their revolution in 1979. One Administration strategy paper argues that "negative results are even more probable in El Salvador because the international momentum of the extreme left is now stronger in the region than in 1979 . . ." Finally, the Administration remains deeply suspicious of the real intentions of the Nicaraguans and the Cubans, who it feels have lied about their involvement in El Salvador. "There is no reason to think they're suddenly going to come clean," said one U.S. diplomat.

Still, the Administration has made one small foray into negotiations: retired Gen. Vernon Walters, Haig's personal envoy, traveled to Havana last month for a secret four-hour meeting with Castro. Walters, a former deputy director of the CIA, is a master linguist and brilliant student of cultures who also satisfies Haig's interest in spycraft. "The boss is fascinated with spooks," said one Haig aide. Haig laid the groundwork for the visit last November when he met secretly with Cuban Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodríguez in Mexico City. Then the Secretary told Walters to tell Castro that Cuba could expect better relations if it stopped aiding revolutionaries, and serious consequences if it persisted. Walters went armed with U.S. intelligence reports that Castro had personally ordered an increase in aid to the Salvadoran rebels last year in an attempt to disrupt the election.

'Daunting': Haig did not expect a breakthrough—and he didn't get one. Walters's trip may have been designed mainly to assure French President François Mitterrand, who has pressed for a political settlement, that Washington was exploring all peaceful avenues in Central America. Castro told Walters that he would be happy to talk, but that he would not consider withdrawing his support for the guerrillas. That seemed to be that, since Washington is not interested in serious talks until it sees a drop in Castro's revolutionary exports. "If Haig really wanted to talk seriously to Castro, he would have sent Tom Enders," said one insider, referring to the influential Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Enders himself cautioned a Congressional committee not to expect much from discussions with Castro. "We have tried to talk with Cuba in the past and it would be wrong to rule out trying again," he said. "But the record is daunting." Until all sides start dealing with one another more seriously, negotiations are not going to lead anywhere.

JOHN BRECHER with JOHN WALCOTT in Washington